



## Changing Paths: Evaluating U.S. Policy toward Lebanon

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### Introduction

While the United States is currently focused on the liberation of Iraq and the establishment of a working democracy there, the legacy of a small nation in the Levant has been ignored. Many studies show that Lebanon was a viable democracy prior to the start of the civil war in 1975. The infrastructure and institutions for democracy are still present, making Lebanon the most likely of the Arab states to succeed in transitioning to democracy.

Considering the U.S. national security strategy of propagating democracy throughout the world, it is in the United States' best interest to consider Lebanon. Successfully supporting a return to democracy there would not only lessen its appeal as a haven for terrorism, but would also provide the United States with a democratic Arab ally in the Middle East.

This essay identifies path dependence as a significant factor behind U.S. policy of disengagement toward Lebanon since 1983. I argue that a new path of engaged political activism could bring more positive results for both Lebanon and the U.S.. A viable U.S. policy aiding Lebanon's democracy and free market would further the U.S. in accomplishing its national security strategies in the Middle East.

### Path Dependence

Path dependence is a theory that emerged from the field of economics. The theory implies that when markets make remediable errors in the choice of products, in the development of products, or another aspect of an economic decision, they seem unwilling to change such initial choice even when better choices come along. Neither do markets remedy the error when it can be overcome. Markets seem to be locked in to a particular path, and all their other choices become dependent on the initial choice.<sup>[1]</sup> The point in time or the event when that initial choice or decision was made is commonly called a "critical juncture." The decision made during this critical juncture can have important influences, sometimes irreversible ones, on future decisions. These future decisions then are said to be path dependent on the initial decision.

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The decisions made during a critical juncture may be conscious or arbitrary. The effects are the same. A commonly cited example in the business world is the dominance of the VHS format over Beta in the video cassette recorder business.[2] The decision by early adopters to embrace the VHS format led to future adopters and inventors to follow and market the same VHS format. Beta may have been superior, but the market could not go back once the choice was made at that critical juncture.

There are limited cases outside economics where path dependence has been studied. In comparative politics, James Mahoney explains how choices made by Central American countries at critical junctures during the nineteenth-century liberal reform period established the direction for Central American development. Mahoney shows why Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Nicaragua developed into different types of political regimes, based on decisions these countries made at crucial times in their history. Their choices regarding state and agrarian development early in the nineteenth century established the development of three types of political regimes in the twentieth century—military-authoritarian (Guatemala, El Salvador), liberal democratic (Costa Rica), and traditional dictatorial (Honduras, Nicaragua).[3]

## **Path Dependence and U.S. Policy toward Lebanon**

U.S. policy toward Lebanon prior to the Beirut bombings in 1983 appeared to be characterized by cooperation, mutual trade, and the promotion of democracy and free enterprise. This policy was centered on the strategic importance of Lebanon. But after the 1983 bombings that killed over 300 U.S. servicemen and other multinational force peacekeepers, the U.S. pulled out, changing its policies and completely ignoring Lebanon. This arguably contributed to the Lebanese state's demise in the 1980's and the prolonged civil war. The war ended with Syria entering Lebanon militarily and exercising hegemony over political leaders, allowing preferred violent groups such as Hezbollah to continue in existence or flourish.

President Reagan's decision to pull U.S. military personnel from Beirut, a policy that came to be known as "cut and run policy," heavily influenced subsequent U.S. policies toward Lebanon. The president's decision triggered a dependent path, limiting subsequent decision makers' policy choices, and negatively affected subsequent U.S. policies. The Beirut bombings and the subsequent policy were mentioned and considered in every major policy discussion. Path dependence theory thus helps to explain U.S. policy toward Lebanon from the Reagan administration to the present.

### **The Reagan Administration (1981–1988)**

During its first three years, the Reagan administration's policy toward developing states was characterized largely within the context of expansionist Soviet foreign policy. This meant military and economic support to governments willing to ally with the U.S. Lebanon's Christian (Maronite)-led government became closely identified with accepting such U.S. support. Reagan was committed to bringing democracy back to Lebanon and keeping it away from the Soviet orbit.

Further, Lebanon was in the forefront of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Southern Lebanon became the headquarters for the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and therefore the site of intense hostilities between Israel, Israeli-backed militias, and the PLO. In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon for the second time after the attempted assassination of the Israeli ambassador to London. The Israeli army surrounded west Beirut and demanded the evacuation of the PLO and Syrians from Beirut. France, the U.S., and Italy sent armed forces to oversee the evacuation of Palestinian forces. The PLO's Yasser Arafat and most of his men were evacuated, leaving mostly women and children in the refugee camps.

Several events deeply challenged the Reagan administration. Bashir Gemayel, the main U.S. supporter and friendly to Israel, was assassinated, leaving a void in the Phalange (Maronite Christian) faction's leadership. Shortly thereafter, Israel allowed Phalangist militias to enter the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Chatila that it was guarding. The Phalange then massacred hundreds of civilians, the women and children who were left in the camps. The U.S., France, and Italy were again forced to send a multinational force (MNF) to help stabilize the situation and try to restore order to the war ravaged country.

After the massacres, the Lebanese government, now under Bashir's brother Amin, clearly represented only Maronite interests, and was viewed as allied to Israel. The Lebanese government had lost credibility, especially within its growing Muslim population. The Lebanese government troops were seen as Phalange militias fighting against Muslim militias.

Despite the loss of credibility, the government of Gemayel remained the only semblance of a legitimate state. For the Reagan administration, Lebanon's sovereignty rested with that "Phalangist" government. Lebanese Muslims, Druze, and other Christian factions fighting that government were therefore seen as on the wrong side of U.S. policy. The U.S. could not afford Lebanon falling into communist or Muslim extremists' control; and Gemayel's government was all they had. The Reagan administration, believing Gemayel's government would fall without U.S. military help, approved the shelling of Muslim areas from U.S. warships. Such action identified the U.S. not as a supporter of the Lebanese state, but a supporter of the Christian Phalangists.

Such support would cost the lives of many Americans throughout 1983. On April 18, the U.S. embassy was bombed by Lebanese allies of Iran. Syrian involvement was also suspected. It seemed Syria was determined to keep Lebanon in a state of chaos to keep any fighting and factionalism away from Syria itself. Lebanon was the buffer from Israel and the PLO and anybody else in the fight. The embassy bombing cost the lives of 63 people, seventeen of whom were Americans. On October 23, a suicide bomber drove a truck loaded with 12,000 pounds of explosives to the U.S. Marine compound at the Beirut airport. The bomber detonated the explosives, collapsing the Marine headquarters building to rubble, and crushing many to death inside. A total of 242 people were killed—220 U.S. Marines, 18 sailors, three soldiers, and one Lebanese. The FBI reported this was the largest non-nuclear explosion at that time.

Reactions from the Reagan administration during the six months following the attacks were meant to show U.S. determination against "terrorist activities." High ranking U.S. officials, including then vice president George H.W. Bush, visited the region to initiate talks with Middle East leaders. A series of National Security Decision Directives (NSDDs) were immediately formulated, affirming U.S. commitment to Lebanon's independence and security. In these NSDDs, the U.S. recognized and acknowledged confessional militias as relevant, not for ending the civil war, but as assets for protecting American lives.

NSDD 117 instructed the American contingent of the MNF "to pursue a policy of vigorous self-defense against all attacks from any hostile quarter."<sup>[4]</sup> This was an escalation from NSDD 103 which stated U.S. concept of operations "should be one of aggressive self-defense" and "should demonstrate ... impartiality in the confessional conflict."<sup>[5]</sup> The directive authorized destructive fire against a full range of foreseeable threats regardless of who fired against U.S. interests. It also pressured the Lebanese government to "undertake a more aggressive security posture in and around Beirut against radical Lebanese and foreign elements which pose a security risk to the MNF."<sup>[6]</sup>

Other directives and policy guidance followed. Each seemed to attempt to secure a handle on the Lebanese crisis, but each also brought unintended consequences. The focus of the directives became increasingly about combating terrorism and protecting U.S. peacekeepers and other assets. Military operations, mainly bombings from U.S. Navy destroyers, were approved for anti-terrorism reasons. The military rules of engagement focused on defending the official American

presence in Lebanon; U.S. naval and tactical air power could be employed at will and the military could fire whenever hostile fire directed at U.S. personnel or facilities was identified. Many rounds were fired, directed at terrorists, which also brought collateral damage. In the process, U.S. credibility as an honest broker for peace among the many factions fighting in Lebanon, as well as confidence in U.S. commitment to Lebanese sovereignty, eroded.

U.S. policy toward Lebanon after the October 1983 Beirut bombings also became characterized by increased cooperation with Israel and more overt hostility against Syria. In the process, Lebanon was trapped in the middle of two powers vying for regional supremacy. Further, the U.S. became more involved with Iran while waging a war against terrorism. Again, the future of the state of Lebanon was trapped in the middle as the radical group Hezbollah was funded and supported by Iran. The rhetoric for supporting Lebanese sovereignty by U.S. administration officials was still there; but the willingness to put words into action may have been insufficient.

With an increasingly pro-Israel stance, hostilities between Syria and the U.S. could not be avoided. The Reagan administration was convinced Syria had something to do with the 1983 bombings and resented Syria's support for terrorist groups. But Syria was still perceived as vital to the peace process, and the Reagan administration largely refrained from direct action against Syria. Instead, the administration let the Lebanese government do the fighting and concentrated on aiding the Lebanese government's military in the fight. NSDD 123, signed by Reagan in February 1984, approved a military plan that provided for "possible actions the United States Government could take to assist the Government of Lebanon in responding to the changing threats and military requirements."<sup>[7]</sup> Among other stipulations, the U.S. was to provide counterinsurgency and counterterrorism training, modern artillery ammunition, and other U.S. equipment in order to deter firing on greater Beirut from Syrian-controlled areas. The directive also authorized "U.S. naval forces to provide naval gunfire and air support against any units in Syrian-controlled territory in Lebanon firing into greater Beirut..."<sup>[8]</sup>

In early 1984, Reagan was faced with making a crucial decision at a critical juncture. The U.S.' military and diplomatic efforts were not yielding desired results. In addition, Reagan was facing reelection in the U.S. and could not afford to make more mistakes in the Lebanese crisis. During a National Security Council meeting in January 1984, the president asked his staff to develop a timetable for the phasing down of USMNF ashore while still planning for a continued presence offshore.

By the end of February 1984, the Reagan administration accepted the fluidity of the situation in Lebanon. The administration could do nothing to stop Syria from forcing Lebanon to abrogate the May 17 Lebanon-Israel Agreement. Lebanon abrogated in exchange for Syria's guarantee of a cease fire and support for a government of national unification. The Reagan administration also recognized its shortcoming in credibility. In NSDD 128, Reagan asked for a plan to bolster confidence in U.S. commitments in the Middle East because of "the serious developments in Lebanon and the perceived erosion of U.S. credibility..."<sup>[9]</sup> Such a plan did not materialize.

By April 1984, the withdrawal of all U.S. military personnel, ashore and offshore, became imminent. As Reagan was sending the U.S. Congress "four separate bills to attack the pressing and urgent problem of international terrorism,"<sup>[10]</sup> U.S. military personnel were abandoning its failed Lebanon peacekeeping mission. The Reagan administration subsequently disengaged from Lebanon, establishing a dependent path of disengagement that characterized the rest of Reagan's term.

### **The Bush Administration (1989–1992)**

U.S. policy toward Lebanon and the Middle East under the Bush administration was conducted with extreme caution. There were no grand schemes and there were no big plans. The Bush

administration probed cautiously to avoid heightening expectations. There was a conscious effort, however, to understand the realities of Middle East politics.

This low key and cautious approach brought considerable success for the process of peace in the region. Under the astute negotiating and deal-making of Secretary of State James Baker, the Bush administration was credited with opening the way for Israelis and Arabs to come to the peace table. Baker brokered many conferences in a short period of time, culminating in the historic October 1991 Madrid conference.

Success in the Arab-Israeli conflict did not always translate to favorable consequences for U.S.-Lebanese relationship. Even the historic Madrid conference only brought a small potential gain for Lebanon. The number of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon who would be able to go back to Palestine if an Arab-Israeli peace agreement was concluded was not significant. On the other hand, progress in the Arab-Israeli conflict meant shifting the focus away from Lebanon and sidestepping these other problems. Arguably, the U.S. could have made substantial contributions to these issues. Instead, they became lost opportunities.

With the trauma of the Beirut bombings still fresh in the American public's mind, the Bush administration was not ready to re-engage Lebanon. The administration did not begin any separate initiatives to improve U.S.-Lebanese relations. Lebanon just concluded a long and bloody civil war where the U.S. became a belligerent and paid the cost of such involvement. The U.S. was not about to become involved again. At best, policy toward Lebanon was simply linked to the overall Middle East peace process. At worst, Lebanon was ignored and considered untouchable.

Lebanon may have become too difficult to justify as a national security interest. The Cold War was over; and the threat of Soviet expansion was no longer a viable reason for action. Protecting an inexpensive and stable supply of oil from the region was still a U.S. national security interest, but Lebanon was not an oil-producing state. Lebanon therefore did not constitute a U.S. strategic interest regarding oil. Absent a clear public justification for action, and considering the fear of risking and losing American lives to terrorist actions, the Bush administration largely ignored Lebanon.

The U.S. removed itself from influencing Lebanon's future and left Syria to take the lead. The 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent formation of a U.S.-led coalition to liberate Kuwait compounded the complexity of U.S.-Lebanese relations. Eager to bring Syria into the coalition, the Bush administration was willing to ignore Syrian hegemony over a supposedly independent and sovereign Lebanese state. Lebanon came under Syrian hegemony politically under the guise of being the arbiter of Lebanon's warring factions. Over 30,000 Syrian military personnel stayed in Lebanon to protect such hegemony.

### **The Clinton Administration (1993–2000)**

The Clinton administration did very little to advance U.S.-Lebanese relations. Other than discussions of when the U.S. would lift the travel ban for tourists and businesses and allowing American businesses to set up in Lebanon, the Clinton administration passed the opportunity to help reconstruct Lebanon. The Clinton administration too was stuck in the dependent path of doing nothing and subsuming Lebanon's interests under the larger Arab-Israeli peace process. Almost 10 years after the Beirut bombings, the U.S. was still unwilling to get involved in a country once considered a vital interest.

With the executive branch unwilling to take on Lebanon, the legislative branch took the lead in promulgating policy. Throughout the 1990's, legislators, many of them of Lebanese descent, took

on the cause of some Lebanese Americans. U.S. policymaking toward Lebanon shifted from the executive to the legislative branch.

Intense lobbying by Lebanese-American groups resulted in congressional hearings. The hearings resulted in the formulation of proposals on how the U.S. could help in Lebanon's reconstruction as well as formulating a proposed U.S. policy toward the country. These proposals laid the foundation for the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003.

### **The Bush Administration (2001–Present)**

Early in the Bush administration's term, the executive branch seemed poised to follow previous U.S. policy and continue to pay lip service to supporting Lebanon's sovereignty. Things changed after the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001. The Bush administration had justification to pursue a clear strategy on foreign policy and wage a global war on terrorism. To protect national security, the Bush administration advocated a more offensive posture that included the right to engage in preemptive strikes. In what has become known as the Bush Doctrine, the U.S. national security strategy aimed to fight international terrorism, especially the state sponsored variety, which included countries harboring terrorists. Another goal of the national security strategy was to promote greater freedom worldwide through democratic reforms, free enterprise, and the elimination of groups or nations that organize with the intention to stifle that progress through radical means.

The new grand strategy was heavily influenced by political morality, and greatly affected present and future policy actions toward the Middle East peace process as well as Lebanon. The Bush administration's foreign policy position institutionalized its moral commitment to support democratic rule, advance freedom, and increase emphasis on state independence and sovereignty. In a speech in November 2003, the president stated "the United States has adopted a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East " and that "the advance of freedom is the calling of our time; it is the calling of our country."[\[11\]](#)

In the new Bush strategy, the moral cause of advancing freedom and fighting global terrorism were enough justification for U.S. intervention. For Lebanon, this position provided an opening for changing its path and re-defining policy toward Lebanon. The events of September 11, 2001 constituted a critical juncture and the Bush doctrine that evolved presented another possible path the Bush administration could take. By taking on terrorism, the "hands off" approach to Lebanon previous administrations followed could be altered. In September 2001, almost 18 years after the Beirut bombings, the effects and influence of Reagan's "cut and run" policy in 1984 could now be reversed.

Early indications are positive. By May 2003, Powell stated that Lebanon "could be a model for democracy and free trade in the region" and that the U.S. "supports an independent and prosperous Lebanon, free of all, all foreign forces."[\[12\]](#) He stated these words following his meeting with Lebanese President Emile Lahoud (Christian), speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri (Shi'ite), and Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri (Sunni), the Lebanese triumvirate leadership in Lebanon's confessional system. Powell recognized the need for considering Lebanese concerns in the Middle East process. He stated that "there has to be another track in addition to the track that is laid out clearly in the roadmap, there has to be another track that deals with Syrian concerns and Lebanese concerns"[\[13\]](#) While still a part of a comprehensive Middle East approach, Lebanon was becoming an integral part.

Congressional leadership continued to be engaged in shaping U.S. policy toward Lebanon under the Bush administration. More congressional hearings followed the 1997 ones when former president Amin Gemayel spoke, including one in 2003 when General Aoun was the key witness. The result was the passing of the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act



of 2003 (SALSRA). The act was signed into Public Law No. 108-175 by the president on December 12, 2003. This law aims "to halt Syrian support for terrorism, end its occupation of Lebanon, stop its development of weapons of mass destruction, cease its illegal importation of Iraqi oil, and hold Syria accountable for its role in the Middle East, and for other purposes."<sup>[14]</sup>

The Bush administration was also actively advocating Lebanese independence and sovereignty in the international community. Together with France, the U.S. sponsored UN Security Council Resolution 1559, calling for "the strict respect of Lebanon 's sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and political independence under the sole and exclusive authority of the government of Lebanon throughout Lebanon."<sup>[15]</sup> Specifically aimed at trying to prevent an impending parliamentary vote on a constitutional amendment to permit the Syrian-backed Lebanese president to extend his term, the resolution stated the Lebanese presidential election should be "free and fair ... according to Lebanese constitutional rules devised without foreign interference or influence."<sup>[16]</sup>

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

In the years following the 1983 Beirut bombings, U.S. policy toward Lebanon changed from full support of Lebanon 's sovereignty and independence to acquiescing to Syrian hegemony over the country. Faced with the possibility of confronting terrorism, the U.S. followed a cautious approach and largely subsumed U.S. interests in Lebanon to U.S. interests in a broader Middle East peace process. In the process, Lebanon was largely ignored in favor of appeasing Syria.

The Bush administration now has the opportunity to deviate from the dependent path of disengagement, reassess its treatment of Lebanon, and determine a new policy that will effectively serve U.S. strategic goals. Such a new policy would be consistent with the U.S. national security strategy of spreading liberal democracy and free markets worldwide, goals arguably more easily obtained in Lebanon than in other Middle Eastern countries with substantial U.S. involvement.

Iraq is in the center of the Bush administration's current national security strategy; it should be Lebanon. The U.S. road map to peace in the Middle East banks on success in democracy-building in Iraq spilling over into other states in the region. Eventually it is hoped that the tide of peace would settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this strategy, Lebanese independence and transition to democracy would be a by-product of Iraqi democracy. But success in Iraq is proving to be elusive and I submit that democratizing Lebanon would be a more expedient and realistic way to show that an Arab nation could be democratic and economically prosperous. Lebanon has a democratic legacy and has the institutions necessary for democratization. Much more, its historical ties to the West make success more probable than Iraq.

Many studies show Lebanon has the greatest potential for further democratic development among the Arab countries in the Middle East. Baaklini, Denoeux, and Springborg found that the presence of established institutions for effective legislature, the strength of a state's parliament, could make transition to democracy less difficult.<sup>[17]</sup> Taking Syrian hegemony out of the equation and focusing solely on the relationship between the legislative branch and the executive branch, Lebanon's legislature is strong and can play an active role in the democratization process. It has an established constitution, is autonomous, and is capable of resisting the executive branch if necessary. Further, it has the resources to effectively influence state decision-making.

It would behoove U.S. policymakers to consider the possibility of making Lebanon the lynchpin to Middle East peace. Lebanon certainly has the potential to become a model for democracy, much more than Iraq does. Lebanon was once the only democratic Arab state in the Middle East. It could once again occupy that distinction. A stable and democratic Lebanon with a free market economy is a potential intermediary between the West and the Middle East nations. Lebanon served the role of a merchant nation before and it could fit in to that role again. The U.S. made a



commitment toward spreading democracy, most especially in the Middle East. Lebanon is still the best candidate and arguably a less costly way of propagating democratic peace. If the U.S. succeeds in helping Lebanon become a model for democracy and free trade, the rest of the region may follow. The Bush administration should fully commit to a path of engagement and support for a sovereign, independent and democratic Lebanon.[18]

## About the Author

Air Force Major Raymond L. Reyes graduated with a Master's in National Security Affairs from the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School in September 2004. His area of emphasis has been politics and security in the Middle East. Major Reyes' master's thesis analyzes US foreign policy toward the Levantine nation of Lebanon and weighs future policy options. The views expressed here are solely those of the author and do not represent the opinions of any institutional or governmental body.

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16. [UNSCR 1559, September 2, 2004](#). Despite the resolution, Lebanon's parliament still voted to amend their constitution to permit Lahoud to stay another three years.

17. Abdo Baaklini, Guilain Denoeux, and Robert Springborg, *Legislative Politics in the Arab World: The Resurgence of Democratic Institutions*. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999), 63.

18. There are two issues that US policy makers can begin evaluating: Hezbollah, and the SALSRA. These are the same issues the Lebanese ambassador to the US considers to be the most controversial issues affecting US -Lebanese relations. The US still considers Hezbollah a terrorist organization; and the US Congress enacted SALSRA, mandating the US executive branch to take action to stop Syria's hegemony over Lebanon.